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ON CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE MORNING

GRACE S RICHMOND

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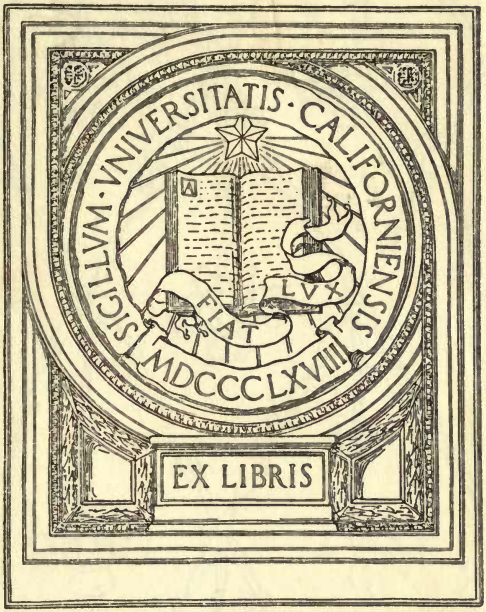

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On Christmas Day in the Morning

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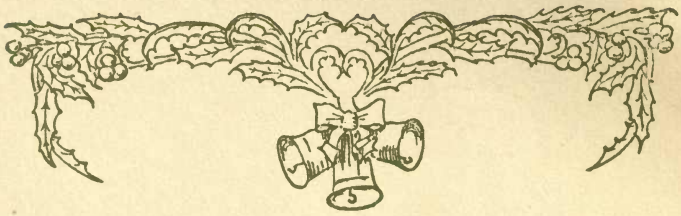

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"'I HAVE N'T GIVEN YOU ANY CHRISTMAS PRESENT.
WILL — I — DO ?' "

On Christmas Day in the Morning

By

GRACE S. RICHMOND

Illustrated by
CHARLES M. RELYEA

New York
Doubleday, Page & Company
1908

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PUBLISHED, OCTOBER, 1908

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Illustrations

"'I haven't given you any Christmas present. Will—I—do?'" *Frontispiece*

PAGE

"Stumbling over their own feet and bundles . . . the crew poured into the warm kitchen" . . 20

"'The children!' she was saying. 'They—they—John—they must be *here*'" 28

"'Merry Christmas, mammy and daddy!'" 34

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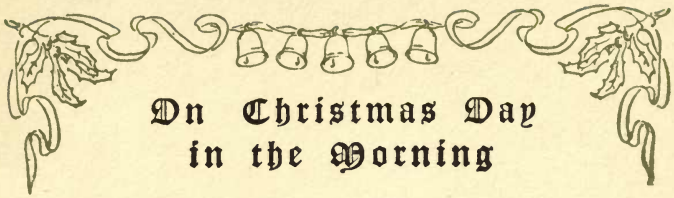


On Christmas Day in the Morning

On Christmas Day in the Morning

And all the angels in heaven do sing,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day;
And all the bells on earth do ring,
On Christmas Day in the morning.

—Old Song.

THAT Christmas Day virtually began a whole year beforehand, with a red-hot letter written by Guy Fernald to his younger sister, Nan, who had been married to Samuel Burnett just two and one-half years. The letter was read aloud by Mrs. Burnett to her husband at the breakfast table, the second day after Christmas. From start to finish

it was upon one subject, and it read as follows:

DEAR NAN:

It 's a confounded, full-grown shame that not a soul of us all got home for Christmas— except yours truly, and he only for a couple of hours. What have the blessed old folks done to us that we treat them like this? I was invited to the Sewalls' for the day, and went, of course — you know why. We had a ripping time, but along toward evening I began to feel worried. I really thought Ralph was home — he wrote me that he might swing round that way by the holidays — but I knew the rest of you were all wrapped up in your own Christmas trees and were n't going to get there.

Well, I took the seven-thirty down and walked in on them. Sitting all alone by the fire, by George, just like the pictures you see of "The Birds All Flown," and that sort of thing. I felt gulpish in my throat, on my honour I did, when I looked at them. Mother just gave one gasp and flew into my arms, and Dad got up more slowly — he has that darned rheumatism worse than ever this winter — and came over and I thought he 'd shake my hand off. Well — I sat down between them by the fire, and pretty soon I got down in the old way on a cushion by mother, and let her run her fingers through my hair, the way she used to — and Nan, I 'll be indicted for perjury if her hand

was n't trembly. They were so glad to see me it made my throat ache.

Ralph had written he could n't get round, and of course you 'd all written and sent them things — jolly things, and they appreciated them. But — blame it all — they were just dead lonesome — and the whole outfit of us within three hundred miles, most within thirty!

Nan — next Christmas it 's going to be different. That 's all I say. I 've got it all planned out. The idea popped into my head when I came away last night. Not that they had a word of blame — not they. They understood all about the children, and the cold snap, and Ed's being under the weather, and Oliver's wife's neuralgia, and Ralph's girl in the West, and all that. But that did n't make the thing any easier for them. As I say, next year —— But you 'll all hear from me then. Meanwhile — run down and see them once or twice this winter, will you, Nan? Somehow it struck me they are n't so young as — they used to be.

Splendid winter weather. Margaret Sewall 's a peach, but I don't seem to make much headway. My best to Sam.

Your affectionate brother,

GUY.

Gay Nan had felt a slight choking in her own throat as she read this letter. "We really must make an

effort to be there Christmas next year, Sam," she said to her husband, and Sam assented cheerfully. He only wished there were a father and mother somewhere in the world for him to go home to.

Guy wrote the same sort of thing, with more or less detail, to Edson and Oliver, his married elder brothers; to Ralph, his unmarried brother; and to Carolyn — Mrs. Charles Wetmore, his other — and elder — married sister. He received varied and more or less sympathetic responses, to the effect that with so many little children, and such snowdrifts as always blocked the roads leading toward North Estabrook, it really was not strange — and of course somebody would go next year. But they had all sent the nicest gifts they could find. Did n't Guy think mother liked those beautiful Russian sables Ralph sent her? And was n't father pleased with his gold-headed cane from Oliver?

Surely with such presents pouring in from all the children, Father and Mother Fernald could n't feel so awfully neglected.

"Gold-headed cane be hanged!" Guy exploded when he read this last sentence from the letter of Marian, Oliver's wife. "I 'll bet she put him up to it. If anybody dares give me a gold-headed cane before I 'm ninety-five I 'll thrash him with it on the spot. He was n't using it, either — bless him. He had his old hickory stick, and he would n't have had that if that abominable rheumatism had n't gripped him so hard. He is n't old enough to use a cane, by jolly, and Ol ought to know it, if Marian does n't. I 'm glad I sent him that typewriter. He liked that, I know he did, and it 'll amuse him, too — not make him think he 's ready to die!"

Guy was not the fellow to forget anything which had taken hold of

him as that pathetic Christmas home-coming had done. When the year had nearly rolled around, the first of December saw him at work getting his plans in train. He began with his eldest brother, Oliver, because he considered Mrs. Oliver the hardest proposition he had to tackle in the carrying out of his idea.

"You see," he expounded patiently, as they sat and stared at him, "it is n't that they are n't always awfully glad to see the whole outfit, children and all, but it just struck me it would do 'em a lot of good to revive old times. I thought if we could make it just as much as possible like one of the old Christmases before anybody got married — hang up the stockings and all, you know — it would give them a mighty jolly surprise. I plan to have us all creep in in the night and go to bed in our old rooms. And then in the morning — See ?"

Mrs. Oliver looked at him. An

eager flush lit his still boyish face — Guy was twenty-eight — and his blue eyes were very bright. His lithe, muscular figure bent toward her pleadingly; all his arguments were aimed at her. Oliver sat back in his impassive way and watched them both. It could not be denied that it was Marian's decisions which usually ruled in matters of this sort.

"It seems to me a very strange plan," was Mrs. Oliver's comment, when Guy had laid the whole thing before her in the most tactful manner he could command. She spoke rather coldly. "It is not usual to think that families should be broken up like this on Christmas Day, of all days in the year. Four families, with somebody gone — a mother or a father — just to please two elderly people who expect nothing of the sort, and who understand just why we can't all get home at once. Don't you think you are really asking a good deal?"

Guy kept his temper, though it was hard work. "It does n't seem to me I am," he answered quite gently. "It 's only for once. I really don't think father and mother would care much what sort of presents we brought them, if we only came ourselves. Of course, I know I 'm asking a sacrifice of each family, and it may seem almost an insult not to invite the children and all, yet — perhaps next year we 'll try a gathering of all the clans. But just for this year — honestly — I do awfully wish you 'd give me my way. If you 'd seen those two last Christmas ——"

He broke off, glancing appealingly at Oliver himself. To his surprise, that gentleman shifted his pipe to the corner of his mouth and put a few pertinent questions to his younger brother. Had he thought it all out? What time should they arrive there? How early on the day after Christmas could they get away? Was he positive

they could all crowd into the house without rousing and alarming the pair?

"Sure thing," Guy declared, quickly. "Marietta—well, you know I've had the soft side of her old heart ever since I was born, somehow. I talked it all over with her last year, and I'm solid with her, all right. She'll work the game. You see, father's quite a bit deaf now ——"

"Father deaf?"

"Sure. Didn't you know it?"

"Forgotten. But mother'd hear us."

"No, she wouldn't. Don't you know how she trusts everything about the house to Marietta since she got that fall ——"

"Mother get a fall?"

"Why, *yes!*" Guy stared at his brother with some impatience. "Don't you remember she fell down the back stairs a year ago last October, and hurt her knee?"

"Certainly, Oliver," his wife interposed. "I wrote for you to tell her how sorry we were. But I supposed she had entirely recovered."

"She 's a little bit lame, and always will be," said Guy, a touch of reproach in his tone. "Her knee stiffens up in the night, and she does n't get up and go prowling about at the least noise, the way she used to. Marietta won't let her. So if we make a whisper of noise Marietta 'll tell her it 's the cat or something. Good Lord! yes — it can be worked all right. The only thing that worries me is the fear that I can't get you all to take hold of the scheme. On my word, Ol," — he turned quite away from his sister-in-law's critical gaze and faced his brother with something like indignation in his frank young eyes — "don't we owe the old home anything but a present tied up in tissue paper once a year?"

Marian began to speak. She

thought Guy was exceeding his rights in talking as if they had been at fault. It was not often that elderly people had so many children within call — loyal children who would do anything within reason. But certainly a man owed something to his own family. And at Christmas! Why not carry out this plan at some other ——

Her husband abruptly interrupted her. He took his pipe quite out of his mouth and spoke decidedly.

"Guy, I believe you 're right. I 'll be sorry to desert my own kids, of course, but I rather think they can stand it for once. If the others fall into line, you may count on me."

Guy got away, feeling that the worst of his troubles was over. In his younger sister, Nan, he hoped to find an ardent ally and he was not disappointed. Carolyn — Mrs. Charles Wetmore — also fell in heartily with the plan. Ralph, from somewhere in the far West, wrote

that he would get home or break a leg. Edson thought the idea rather a foolish one, but was persuaded by Jessica, his wife — whom Guy privately declared a trump — that he must go by all means. And so they all fell into line, and there remained for Guy only the working out of the details.

"Mis' Fernald" — Marietta Cooley strove with all the decision of which she was capable to keep her high-pitched, middle-aged voice in order — "'fore you get to bed I 'm most forgettin' what I was to ask you. I s'pose you 'll laugh, but Guy — he wrote me partic'lar he wanted you and his father to" — Marietta's rather stern, thin face took on a curious expression — "to hang up your stockin's."

Mrs. Fernald paused in the doorway of the bedroom opening from the sitting-room downstairs. She

looked back at Marietta with her gentle smile.

"Guy wrote that?" she asked. "Then — it almost looks as if he might be coming himself, does n't it, Marietta?"

"Well, I don 't know 's I 'd really expect him," Marietta replied, turning her face away and busying herself about the hearth. "I guess what he meant was more in the way of a surprise for a Christmas present — something that 'll go into a stockin', maybe."

"It 's rather odd he should have written you to ask me," mused Mrs. Fernald, as she looked out the stockings.

Marietta considered rapidly. "Well, I s'pose he intended for me to get 'em on the sly without mentionin' it to you, an' put in what he sent, but I sort of guessed you might like to fall in with his idee by hangin' 'em up yourself, here by the

chimbley, where the children all used to do it. Here 's the nails, same as they always was."

Mrs. Fernald found the stockings, and touched her husband on the shoulder, as he sat unlacing his shoes. "Father, Guy wrote he wanted us to hang up our stockings," she said, raising her voice a little and speaking very distinctly. The elderly man beside her looked up, smiling.

"Well, well," he said, "anything to please the boy. It does n't seem more than a year since he was a little fellow hanging up his own stocking, does it, mother?"

The stockings were hung in silence. They looked thin and lonely as they dangled beside the dying fire. Marietta hastened to make them less lonely. "Well," she said, in a shamefaced way, "the silly boy said I was to hang mine, too. Goodness knows what he 'll find to put into it that 'll fit, 'less it 's a poker."

They smiled kindly at her, wished her good night, and went back into their own room. The little episode had aroused no suspicions. It was very like Guy's affectionate boyishness.

"I presume he 'll be down," said Mrs. Fernald, as she limped quietly about the room, making ready for bed. "Don't you remember how he surprised us last year? I 'm sorry the others can't come. Of course, I sent them all the invitation, just as usual — I shall always do that — but it *is* pretty snowy weather, and I suppose they don't quite like to risk it."

Presently, as she was putting out the light, she heard Marietta at the door.

"Mis' Fernald, Peter Piper's got back in this part o' the house, somehow, and I can't lay hands on him. Beats all how cute that cat is. Seem 's if he knows when I 'm goin' to put

him out in the wood-shed. I don't think likely he 'll do no harm, but I thought I 'd tell you, so 'f you heard any queer noises in the night you 'd know it was Peter."

"Very well, Marietta" — the soft voice came back to the schemer on the other side of the door. "Peter will be all right, wherever he is. I shan't be alarmed if I hear him."

"All right, Mis' Fernald; I just thought I 'd let you know," and the guileful one went grinning away.

There was a long silence in the quiet sleeping-room. Then, out of the darkness, came this little colloquy:

"Emeline, you are n't getting to sleep."

"I — know I 'm not, John. I — Christmas Eve keeps one awake, somehow. It always did."

"Yes. . . . I don't suppose the children realise at all, do they?"

"Oh, no — oh, no! They don't

realise — they never will, till —— they're here themselves. It's all right. I think — I think at least Guy will be down to-morrow, don't you?"

"I guess maybe he will." Then, after a short silence. "Mother — you've got me, you know. You know — you've always got me, dear."

"Yes." She would not let him hear the sob in her voice. She crept close, and spoke cheerfully in his best ear. "And you've got me, Johnny Boy!"

"Thank the Lord, I have!"

So, counting their blessings, they fell asleep at last. But, even in sleep, one set of lashes was strangely wet.

"Christopher Jinks, what a drift!"

"Lucky we were n't two hours later."

"*Sh-h* — they might hear us."

"Nan, stop laughing, or I 'll drop a snowball down your neck!"

"Here, Carol, give me your hand. I 'll plough you through. Large bodies move slowly, of course, but go elbows first and you 'll get there."

"Gee *whiz!* Can't you get that door open? I 'll bet it's frozen fast."

A light showed inside the kitchen. The storm-door swung open, propelled by force from inside. A cautious voice said low: "That the Fernald family?"

A chorus of whispers came back at Miss Marietta Cooley:

"Yes, yes — let us in, we 're freezing."

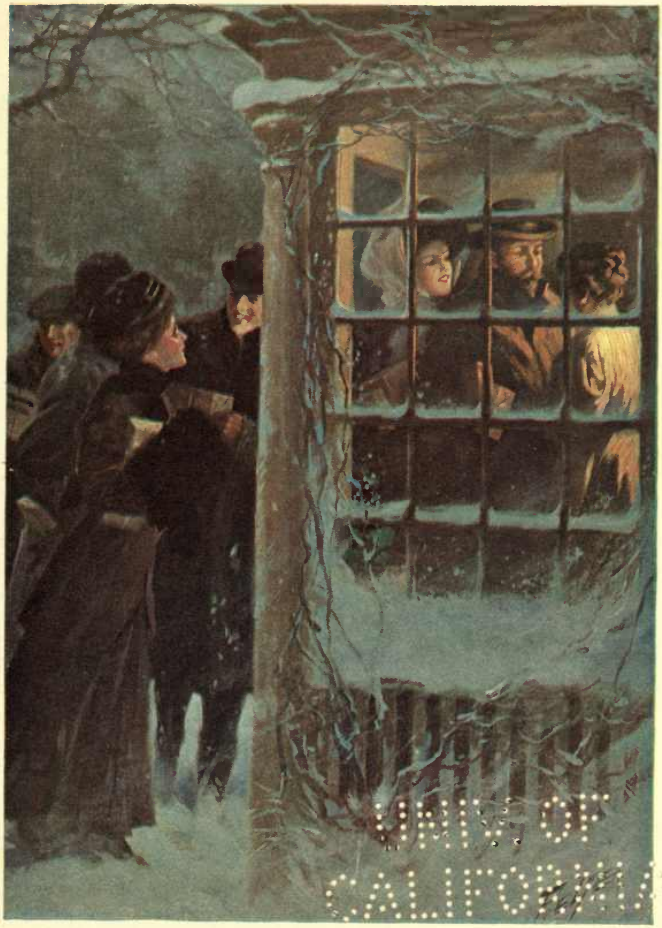
"You bet we 're the Fernald family — every man-Jack of us — not one missing."

"Oh, Marietta — you dear old thing!"

"Hurry up — this is their side of the house."

"*Sh-h-h* —"

"Carol, your *sh-h-ishes* would wake the dead!"



"STUMBLING OVER THEIR OWN FEET AND BUNDLES . . .
THE CREW POURED INTO THE WARM KITCHEN"

Stumbling over their own feet and bundles in the endeavour to be preternaturally quiet, the crew poured into the warm kitchen. Bearded Oliver, oldest of the clan; stout Edson, big Ralph, tall and slender Guy — and the two daughters of the house, Carolyn, growing plump and rosy at thirty; Nan, slim and girlish at twenty-four — they were all there. Marietta heaved a sigh of content as she looked them over.

"Well, I did n't really think you 'd get here — all of you. Thank the Lord, you have. I s'pose you 're tearin' hungry, bein' past 'leven. If you think you can eat quiet as cats, I 'll feed you up, but if you 're goin' to make as much rumpus as you did comin' round the corner o' the woodshed I 'll have to pack you straight off to bed up the back stairs."

They pleaded for mercy and hot food. They got it — everything that could be had that would diffuse no

odour of cookery through the house. Smoking clam-broth, a great pot of baked beans, cold meats, and jellies — they had no reason to complain of their reception. They ate hungrily with the appetites of winter travel.

"Say, but this is great," exulted Ralph, the stalwart, consuming a huge wedge of mince pie with a fine disregard for any consequences that might overtake him. "This alone is worth it. I have n't eaten such pie in a century. What a jolly place this old kitchen is! Let 's have a candy-pull to morrow. I have n't been home Christmas in — let me see — by Jove, I believe it 's six — seven — yes, seven years. Look here: there 's been some excuse for me, but what about you people that live near ?"

He looked accusingly about. Carolyn got up and came around to him. "Don't talk about it to-night," she whispered. "We have n't any of us realised how long it 's been."

"We 'll get off to bed now," Guy declared, rising. "I can't get over the feeling that they may catch us down here. If either of them should want some hot water or anything——"

"The dining-room door 's bolted," Marietta assured him, "but it might need explainin' if I had to bring 'em hot water by way of the parlour. Now, go awful careful up them stairs. They 're pretty near over your ma's head, but I don't dare have you tramp through the settin'-room to the front ones. Now, remember that seventh stair creaks like Ned — you 've got to step right on the outside edge of it to keep it quiet. I don't know but what you boys better step right up over that seventh stair without touchin' foot to it."

"All right — we 'll step!"

"Who's going to fix the bundles?" Carolyn paused to ask as she started up the stairs.

"Marietta," Guy answered. "I 've

labeled every one, so it 'll be easy. If they hear paper rattle, they 'll think it 's the usual presents we 've sent on, and if they come out they 'll see Marietta, so it 's all right. Quiet, now. Remember the seventh stair!"

They crept up, one by one, each to his or her old room. There needed to be no "doubling up," for the house was large, and each room had been left precisely as its owner had left it. It was rather ghostly, this stealing silently about with candles, and in the necessity for the suppression of speech the animation of the party rather suffered eclipse. It was late, and they were beginning to be sleepy, so they were soon in bed. But, somehow, once composed for slumber, more than one grew wakeful again.

Guy, lying staring at a patch of wintry moonlight on the odd striped paper of his wall — it had stopped snowing since they had come into the house, and the clouds had broken

away, leaving a brilliant sky — discovered his door to be softly opening. The glimmer of a candle filtered through the crack, a voice whispered his name.

"Who is it?" he answered under his breath.

"It 's Nan. May I come in?"

"Of course. What 's up?"

"Nothing. I wanted to talk a minute." She came noiselessly in, wrapped in a woolly scarlet kimono, scarlet slippers on her feet, her brown braids hanging down her back. The frost-bloom lately on her cheeks had melted into a ruddy glow, her eyes were stars. She set her candle on the little stand, and sat down on the edge of Guy's bed. He raised himself on his elbow and lay looking appreciatively at her.

"This is like old times," he said. "But won't you be cold?"

"Not a bit. I 'm only going to stay a minute. Anyhow, this thing

is warm as toast. . . . Yes, is n't it like old times?"

"Got your lessons for to-morrow?"

She laughed. "All but my Cæsar. You 'll help me with that, in the morning, won't you?"

"Sure — if you 'll make some cushions for my bobs."

"I will. Guy — how's Lucy Harper?"

"She 's all right. How's Bob Fields?"

"Oh, I don't care for him, now!" She tossed her head.

He kept up the play. "Like Dave Strong better, huh? He 's a softy."

"He is n't. Oh, Guy — I heard you had a new girl."

"New girl nothing. Don't care for girls."

"Yes, you do. At least I think you do. Her name 's —Margaret."

The play ceased abruptly. Guy's face changed. "Perhaps I do," he

murmured, while his sister watched him in the candle-light.

"She won't answer yet?" she asked very gently.

"Not a word."

"You 've cared a good while, haven 't you, dear?"

"Seems like ages. Suppose it is n't."

"No — only two years, really caring hard. Plenty of time left."

He moved his head impatiently. "Yes, if I did n't mind seeing her smile on Tommy Gower — de'il take him — just as sweetly as she smiles on me. If she ever held out the tip of her finger to me, I 'd seize it and hold on to it for fair. But she does n't. She won't. And she 's going South next week for the rest of the winter, and there 's a fellow down there in South Carolina where she goes — oh, he — he 's red-headed after her, like the rest of us. And, well — I 'm up against it good and hard, Nan, and that 's the truth."

"Poor boy. And you gave up going to see her on Christmas Day, and came down here into the country just to ——"

"Just to get even with myself for the way I 've neglected 'em these two years while my head 's been so full of — her. It is n't fair. After last year I 'd have come home to-day if it had meant I had to lose — well — Margaret knows I 'm here. I don't know what she thinks."

"I don't believe, Guy, boy, she thinks the less of you. Yes — I must go. It will all come right in the end, dear — I 'm sure of it. No, I don't know how Margaret feels — Good night — good night!"

Christmas morning, breaking upon a wintry world — the Star in the East long set. Outside the house a great silence of drift-wrapped hill and plain; — inside, a crackling fire upon a wide hearth, and a pair of

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"'THE CHILDREN!' SHE WAS SAYING. 'THEY — THEY — JOHN — THEY MUST BE HERE!'"

NO TEXT
APPLICABLE

elderly people waking to a lonely holiday.

Mrs. Fernald crept to the door of her room — the injured knee always made walking difficult after a night's quiet. She meant to sit down by the fire which she had lately heard Marietta stirring and feeding into activity, and warm herself at its flame. She remembered with a sad little smile that she and John had hung their stockings there, and looked to see what miracle had been wrought in the night.

"*Father!*"—Her voice caught in her throat. . . What was all this? . . By some mysterious influence her husband learned that she was calling him, though he had not really heard. He came to the door and looked at her, then at the chimneypiece where the stockings hung — a long row of them, as they had not hung since the children grew up — stockings of quality: one of brown silk, Nan's; a fine

gray sock with scarlet clocks, Ralph's; — all stuffed to the top, with bundles overflowing upon the chimneypiece and even to the floor below.

"What 's this — what 's this?" John Fernald's voice was puzzled. "Whose are these?" He limped closer. He put on his spectacles and stared hard at a parcel protruding from the sock with the scarlet clocks.

"'*Merry Christmas to Ralph from Nan,*'" he read. "'To Ralph from Nan,'" he repeated vaguely. His gaze turned to his wife. His eyes were wide like a child's. But she was getting to her feet, from the chair into which she had dropped.

"The children!" she was saying. "They — they — John — they must be *here!*"

He followed her through the chilly hall to the front staircase, seldom used now, and up — as rapidly as those slow, stiff joints would allow.

Trembling, Mrs. Fernald pushed open the first door at the top.

A rumpled brown head raised itself from among the pillows, a pair of sleepy but affectionate brown eyes smiled back at the two faces peering in, and a voice brimful of mirth cried softly: "Merry Christmas, mammy and daddy!" They stared at her, their eyes growing misty. *It was their little daughter Nan, not yet grown up!*

They could not believe it. Even when they had been to every room;—had seen their big son Ralph, still sleeping, his yet youthful face, full of healthy colour, pillowed on his brawny arm, and his mother had gently kissed him awake to be half-strangled in his hug;—when they had met Edson's hearty laugh as he fired a pillow at them — carefully, so that his father could catch it;—when they had seen plump pretty Carol pulling on her stockings as she

sat on the floor smiling up at them;— Oliver, advancing to meet them in his bath-robe and slippers;— Guy, holding out both arms from above his blankets, and shouting "Merry Christmas! — and how do you like your children?" — even then it was difficult to realise that not one was missing — and that no one else was there. Unconsciously Mrs. Fernald found herself looking about for the sons' wives and daughters' husbands and children. She loved them all; — yet — to have her own, and no others, just for this one day — it was happiness indeed.

When they were all downstairs, about the fire, there was great rejoicing. They had Marietta in; indeed, she had been hovering continuously in the background, to the apparently frightful jeopardy of the breakfast in preparation, upon which, nevertheless, she had managed to keep a practised eye.

"And you were in it, Marietta?" Mr. Fernald said to her in astonishment, when he first saw her. "How in the world did you get all these people into the house and to bed without waking us?"

"It was pretty consid'able of a resk," Marietta replied, with modest pride, "seein' as how they was inclined to be middlin' lively. But I kep' a-hushin' 'em up, and I filled 'em up so full of victuals they could n't talk. I did n't know 's there 'd be any eatables left for to-day," she added — which last remark, since she had been slyly baking for a week, Guy thought might be considered pure bluff.

At the breakfast table, while the eight heads were bent, this thanksgiving arose, as the master of the house, in a voice not quite steady, offered it to One Unseen:

Thou who camest to us on that first Christmas Day, we bless Thee

for this good and perfect gift Thou sendest us to-day, that Thou forgettest us not in these later years, but givest us the greatest joy of our lives in these our loyal children.

Nan's hand clutched Guy's under the table. "Does n't that make it worth it?" his grasp said to her, and hers replied with a frantic pressure, "Indeed it does, but we don't deserve it."

. . . It was late in the afternoon, a tremendous Christmas dinner well over, and the group scattered, when Guy and his mother sat alone by the fire. The "boys" had gone out to the great stock barn with their father to talk over with him every detail of the prosperous business he, with the help of an invaluable assistant, was yet able to manage. Carolyn and Nan had ostensibly gone with them, but in reality the former was calling upon an old friend of her childhood, and the latter had begged

"'MERRY CHRISTMAS, MAMMY AND DADDY!'"

a horse and sleigh and driven merrily away alone upon an errand she would tell no one but her mother.

Mrs. Fernald sat in her low chair at the side of the hearth, her son upon a cushion at her feet, his head resting against her knee. Her slender fingers were gently threading the thick locks of his hair, as she listened while he talked to her of everything in his life, and, at last, of the one thing he cared most about.

"Sometimes I get desperate and think I may as well give her up for good and all," he was saying. "She 's so — so — *elusive* — I don't know any other word for it. I never can tell how I stand with her. She 's going South next week. I 've asked her to answer me before she goes. Somehow I 've clung to the hope that I 'd get my answer to-day. You 'll laugh, but I left word with my office-boy to wire me if a note or anything from her came. It 's four o'clock, and

I have n't heard. She — you see, I can't help thinking it 's because she 's going to — turn me down — and — hates to do it — Christmas Day!"

He turned suddenly and buried his face in his mother's lap; his shoulders heaved a little in spite of himself. His mother's hand caressed his head more tenderly than ever, but, if he could have seen, her eyes were very bright.

They were silent for a long time. Then suddenly a jingle of sleigh bells approached through the falling winter twilight, drew near, and stopped at the door. Guy's mother laid her hands upon his shoulders. "Son," she said, "there 's some one stopping now. Perhaps it 's the boy with a message from the station."

He was on his feet in an instant. Her eyes followed him as he rushed away through the hall. Then she rose and quietly closed the sitting-room door behind him.

As Guy flung open the front door, a tall and slender figure in gray furs and a wide gray hat was coming up the walk. Eyes whose glance had long been his dearest torture met Guy Fernald's and fell. Lips like which there were no others in the world smiled tremulously in response to his eager exclamation. And over the piquant young face rose an exquisite colour which was not altogether born of the wintry air. The girl who for two years had been only "elusive" had taken the significant step of coming to North Estabrook in response to an eloquent telephone message sent that morning by Nan.

Holding both her hands fast, Guy led her up into the house — and found himself alone with her in the shadowy hall. With one gay shout Nan had driven away toward the barn. The inner doors were all closed. Blessing the wondrous saga-

city of his womankind, Guy took advantage of his moment.

"Nan brought you — I see that. I know you 're very fond of her, but — you did n't come wholly to please her, did you — Margaret?"

"Not wholly."

"I 've been looking all day for my answer. I — oh — I wonder if —" he was gathering courage from her aspect, which for the first time in his experience failed to keep him at a distance — "*dare* I think you — *bring it?*"

She slowly lifted her face. "I thought it was so — so dear of you," she murmured, "to come home to your people instead of — staying with me. I thought you deserved — what you say — you want ——"

"*Margaret* — you ——"

"I haven 't given you any Christmas present. Will — *I* — do?"

"Will *you* do! . . . *Oh!*"—It was a great explosive sigh of relief

and joy, and as he gave vent to it he caught her close. "Will — *you* — do! . . . Good Lord! . . . I rather *think you will!*"

"*Emeline* ——"

"*Yes, John dear?*"

"*You're not — crying?*"

"*Oh, no — no, no, John!*" *What a blessing deafness is sometimes! The ear cannot detect the delicate tremolo which might tell the story too plainly. And in the darkness of night, the eye cannot see.*

"*It's been a pretty nice day, has n't it?*"

"*A beautiful day!*"

"*I guess there's no doubt but the children care a good deal for the old folks yet.*"

"*No doubt at all, dear.*"

"*It's good to think they're all asleep under the roof once more, is n't it? — And one extra one. We like her, don't we?*"

"Oh, very, very much!"

"Yes, Guy's done well. I always thought he'd get her, if he hung on. The Fernalds always hang on, but Guy's got a mite of a temper — I did n't know but he might let go a little too soon. Well — it's great to think they all plan to spend every Christmas Day with us, is n't it, Emeline?"

"Yes, dear — it's — great."

"Well — I must let you go to sleep. It's been a big day, and I guess you're tired. Emeline, we've not only got each other — we've got the children too. That's a pretty happy thing at our age, is n't it, now?"

"Yes — yes."

"Good night — Christmas Night, Emeline."

"Good night, dear."

Paul El

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